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ABSTRACT

This paper is a report of a training session conducted for a Special Weapons and Tactics Squad (SWAT Squad). SWAT Squad is a unit of police officers who are specially trained to handle situations involving armed and barricaded suspects. The goal was to better prepare the officers to talk with the suspects. The SWAT commander argued that ninety percent of all armed and barricaded situations could be resolved without gunfire if verbal contact could be established with the suspect. A training session was developed incorporating interviewing skills and crisis intervention materials in an effort to increase the officer's ability to establish and maintain verbal contact. The session is evaluated, SWAT communication problems are itemized, and recommendations for future training are made. (Author)

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COMMUNICATION IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

A Paper Presented at The
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COMMUNICATION IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

This paper is an account of a communication "thing." I cannot call it an experimental investigation, an exploratory study, a field study, a preliminary report, a "think" piece, a philosophical perspective, or assign any other title that would lend it the necessary credibility to be accepted as a rigorous academic investigation. Nonetheless, I wish to share it with my colleagues as a stimulus for future thought and research. The whole event has certainly boggled, mystified and stimulated my mind.

Last year a student approached me with an inquiry about my training in interviewing and crisis intervention. She said her sister worked for the police department in a division called "Training and Resources." Her sister was looking for someone who might know something about dealing with suspects who were armed and resisting arrest. My student thought the armed, barricaded suspect might need some "talking to" and since I knew a lot about "talking to" people, I might qualify as a source of information for dealing with such an explosive situation. This student's rather naive assessment of the police need and my training turned out to be neither naive or simplistic.

In many large cities today police departments now have specially trained units called Special Weapons and Tactics Squads (SWAT Squads). Usually these squads attempt to maintain low visibility in the community because of the unsavory kind of work they must do. They must bring under control armed suspects who are threatening their own lives or the lives of others. "Bringing the suspect under control" frequently means force, and force sometimes leads to death. As we well know, the new television series. S.W.A.T., depicts a large group of trigger-happy men in baseball hats who roar around our cities repelling down skyscrapers, carrying bodies from buildings, shooting off countless rounds of ammunition, using helicopters, tear gas, and all of this in a single SWAT operation. SWAT squads

no longer have low visibility, and their actual activities and procedures are grossly misunderstood.

Eventually the student's sister, a SWAT sergeant, and I got together to talk about the relationship of my communication training to the SWAT Squad's needs. The sergeant argued that ninety percent of all armed and barricaded suspect operations were resolved without gunfire if verbal contact could be established with the suspect. He further defined verbal contact as "getting the suspect to talk to us, either on the telephone or just shouting from his hiding place." If verbal contact was not established, the episode almost always dissolved into violence which was initiated by the suspect. Specifically, the SWAT officer wanted to know if I could suggest any techniques that would increase his officers' skills in eliciting responses, establishing verbal contact, with armed, barricaded suspects. The police were eager to discover new ways to avoid the use of force, to sharpen their nonviolent skills in handling violent episodes. I agreed to work with the SWAT Squad in developing a training session which might increase the officers' skills in the use of verbal tactics as opposed to physical force.

The remainder of the paper will describe the SWAT personnel, the training session presented, an evaluation of the session, a description of SWAT's unique communication problems, and conclude with some suggestions for future training.

SWAT Personnel

The SWAT Squad is composed of specially trained and experienced rank and file officers. After three years of service on the police force an officer applies for special duty on the SWAT Squad. After extensive evaluation by senior officers and a six-week training session, the officers are assigned to the Squad. During their assigned duty hours they function as regular officers. When a SWAT operation arises, they return to the police department, change to their SWAT

uniform, receive their instructions, and approach the area of the operation.

The Training Session

A police lieutenant with a Master's degree in psychology worked with me in developing the training session. In addition to providing technical information unknown to me, we reasoned that the lieutenant might make the officers more receptive to receiving information from a young, small female. To our knowledge women had never before been used in initial or on-going training sessions. The lieutenant began with instructions covering police policy and procedure. He discussed the logistics and procedures of approaching, organizing, and executing a SWAT operation. He pointed out the complexities involved in handling the public and the unique difficulties a SWAT Squad faces. SWAT is called in only in unusual and critical circumstances. The SWAT Squad is requested by a regular officer who has discovered a situation in which a suspect has barricaded himself and is armed. He may or may not have hostages. SWAT is uniquely trained to handle situations in which weapons or tactics are necessary to protect the public, the officers, and the suspect. Both the suspect and the public usually know why SWAT has been called, further heightening the tension of the situation. The team was reminded of certain policies that must dominate every operation: first, protection of innocent bystanders; second, protection of fellow officers; third, protection of the suspect. Another generally held policy is to never exchange an officer for a hostage or several hostages. These kinds of internal police matters were discussed by the lieutenant. I was then introduced as one who could advise them in ways of talking with the armed and barricaded suspect. A very brief outline of the ideas I presented follows:

> "The Essence of the Civilization of Dialogue presupposes mutual respect and understanding, it does not presuppose agreement. It is no good saying that the Civilization of the Dialogue cannot arise when the other party

will not talk. We have to find a way to induce him to talk."

I. Situation and Suspect Assessment
   A. Definition of terms used in assessing both the situation and the suspect.
      1. Fact
      2. Inference
      3. Judgment
   B. The Suspect
      1. What is his emotional state?
         a. What can he gain?
         b. What can he lose?
         c. What behavior has he employed in the past?
         d. Is he capable of reasoning?
         e. People in crisis may experience many different emotions: anxiety, fear, helplessness, shame, anger, embarrassment, abandonment.
      2. Focus on the suspect's perception of the situation.

II. Communication Factors
   A. Nonverbal dimensions
      1. Eye contact
      2. Appearance
      3. Posture
      4. Voice quality
   B. Verbal dimensions
      1. Meanings are in people
      2. Language structures reality

III. Types of Questions
   A. Open-ended questions are nondirective and allow the suspect to offer as much or as little as he wants. The advantage of this kind of question is that the suspect may be encouraged to give a large amount of information. The disadvantage is that he may not want to take the time or effort to respond.

      Tell me what's going on.
      How can we help?
      How do you feel?
      What do you want?

   B. Direct questions allow the suspect to answer in a more concise and simple manner, but may not allow the suspect to offer all of the information he could. Direct questions require less effort and initiative on the part of the suspect.

      How many guns do you have?
      Will you talk to someone other than an officer?
      Why won't you release the hostages?

C. Bi-polar questions are easy for the suspect to answer because he only has to pick one of two choices. The disadvantage is that neither of the two choices may be the best alternative for the situation. Little information is obtained when using bi-polar questions.

> Are you coming out or staying in?
> Do you want to talk with a priest or doctor?
> Are you wounded?

D. Loaded questions contain words that are emotionally stimulating for the suspect. Generally, loaded questions hinder effective communication.

> Blackie, are you coming out?
> You want to be shot on sight or jailed?
> Are you going to be stupid and run?

E. Probe questions are very short questions that ask for more explanation or clarification. The probe encourages the suspect to offer more thorough and complete information.

> Why?
> Tell me more.
> How come?
> What else?

I attempted to emphasize that communication could occur in spite of grave differences, that each of us operates in a world of varying facts, inferences, and judgments, and that audience analysis is critical to establishing effective communication. I briefly outlined the impact that various verbal and nonverbal messages have upon the SWAT situation. Then I moved to the core of my presentation -- Establishing and maintaining verbal contact hinges on one's ability to ask questions that will elicit response. I drew upon the interviewing class that I teach and the training I provide a crisis intervention agency. By joining together the crisis intervention material and the interviewing skills, I was able to suggest some specific techniques and behaviors for the officers to use.

The final hour of the three-hour session was spent using the questioning techniques in non-threatening role-playing situations. The goal was to help the officers identify and formulate the various types of questions and to determine the relative effectiveness of the questions in eliciting information. The

exercises are listed below.

1. Discover as much as possible about the other person. Strive for opinions, attitudes, beliefs and feelings rather than superficial information such as age, occupation and hobbies.

2. A friend comes to you with a serious problem, but is reluctant to tell you about it. Help him with his problem.

3. Using only bi-polar questions, determine the other person's opinions about Watergate.

4. Using only open-ended questions, determine the other person's opinions about Watergate.

5. You are eager to date a girl that you have just met at the home of a mutual friend, but you do not know her age, marital status, occupation or interests. Discover this information. If you are married and can no longer fantasize this situation, assume that you want to know more about this girl because she seems like a potential friend for your teen-age son.

6. Your boss has been rather cool and distant with you the past two weeks. This behavior is unusual because generally you exchange good natured remarks and jokes and frequently take coffee breaks together. Discover what is wrong.

Evaluation of the Training

The training session was offered three separate times in three separate places because of the duty hours of the officers involved. The first session was held in a small conference room with approximately twelve officers present. The next two sessions were held in increasingly larger rooms with twenty-four and thirty-two men, respectively. All three sessions occurred within a week.

Evaluation of the sessions consists of informal observation and discussions with the participants.

The lieutenant responded quite favorably to the ideas being presented, but seemed suspicious about any real changes or improvements in SWAT's success because of the training. As a seasoned officer he seemed reluctant to be enthusiastic, but yet eager to remain open to new ideas and input. The sergeant in charge seemed pleased to have exposed his men to a new idea and was eager to try to expand this session into sessions for other departments in the

area. But this did not develop. Perhaps the reaction from the men was unfavorable, funds were unavailable, or perhaps his supervisors were not satisfied.

My attention was focused primarily on the officers. Their reactions seemed generally favorable, but with two distinct trends. The more mature officer appeared more interested in and open to the notion of increasing their non-violent skills. Officers who appeared physically older and had been on the squad for a longer period of time asked more questions, participated in discussion more freely, and appeared more receptive to noncombative training. The younger officers seemed to challenge my reasoning and doubt the usefulness of the suggestions I offered. Only one officer was aggressively antagonistic and suspicious of my competence. Most of the younger officers were cautiously receptive.

An inspector who attended part of one meeting was not enamored with part of the presentation dealing with differences between facts and inferences. He was concerned with officers being able to make quick and efficient decisions, Rapid decision making might be hampered if the officer began to question his inference-making process.

My evaluation of the training session follows:

1. The sessions need to be offered more than once. Men cannot be trained to fire a gun, repell, or question effectively in a single training session. One study done with officers which reported positive reactions to training in interpersonal communication involved a six-day training program. More than one session seems necessary to improve interpersonal communication skills.

2. The sessions should utilize film coverage of actual SWAT operations in order to make the skills and techniques more realistic to the officer.

3. More experiential activities should be incorporated.

4. The training sessions did more to make me aware of SWAT's unique communication problems than to train the officers.

Perhaps the most significant part of this "thing" is that both the officers and the trainer have a more precise description of the communication problems inherent in SWAT situations. After more carefully specifying the needs of the officers and the SWAT procedure, a more meaningful training session could be developed. Let me try to itemize the communication problems faced by the SWAT Squad based on information derived from the training session.

SWAT's Unique Communication Problems

Police procedure and policy places severe limitations on communication. The SWAT Squad is obligated to first evacuate the area and protect innocent bystanders. During this critical period of time, the suspect is treated as an object, thing, animal to be contained. Problem-solving communication is not usually begun until the parameters of the SWAT operation have been established. Further, in most SWAT situations, defensive communication has already taken place because SWAT personnal are usually called in after an initial confrontation with another officer. The initial confrontation, together with the time lag involved in setting up a SWAT operation, creates a maximally hostile environment in which problem-solving communication would be next to impossible.

The Squad must also remember its commitment to the total community. A SWAT operation must be cleared up as quickly as possible in order to keep the officers free to respond to other calls. The time factor becomes a determinant in how long the officers can wait for a suspect to surrender. Some officers feel it is best to force the suspect to make a quick decision while others are in favor of giving the suspect time. The fact remains that while officers are tied up in one operation they are leaving other areas of the city unguarded. Communication may never reach its maximum flow because of time and pressure

factors that result from the police obligation to the total community.

Another policy factor that affects communication is the question of what and how many risks should be taken in order to protect the suspect. If a suspect with a psychotic history of mass murders is firing randomly from his barricaded position, what kind of risks should be taken to contain this suspect? Is any communication possible? If his position is a house without a telephone, does the sergeant risk one of his men by having the officer climb a pole and connect a telephone line so that the suspect may be called? Decisions of this sort critically affect the potential for problem-solving communication.

A final policy which severely limits communication is a necessary safety measure: never establish visual contact with the suspect. If either suspect or officer is visible, either is "shootable." Because the suspect cannot be seen, much nonverbal information is eliminated. Clothing, physical condition, nervousness, and numerous other useful cues are missing when visual contact is limited. Limited nonverbal information leads to a discussion of specific communication barriers.

Because of limited nonverbal information, the officer is confined to verbal exchanges with the suspect. If there is a great physical distance between the suspect and officer, both individuals must resort to yelling or the officer may use the bullhorn. Because of the effort required to yell, the messages become short, incomplete fragments. Undoubtedly, much is never said because of the conditions. If a telephone call can be arranged, that is far more effective. A telephone call allows the suspect to negotiate his position without everyone in the neighborhood hearing his concessions to the officer. Further, it allows a more relaxed way of dealing with complete thoughts and feelings. The telephone also gives some nonverbal information. Rate of speech, pauses, pitch, voice quality provides clues about the suspect.

Cultural barriers are another source of communication problems. Obviously,

blacks, chicanos, Chinese, etc., hold different values and ways of com
But there are other cultural differences sometimes not immediately vis
the officer. The Mafia, long-term criminals, drug offenders, the ment
the elderly belong to subcultures, each with stringent cultural limita
their behavior. Their vocabulary, nonverbal behavior, values, appeara
beliefs must be considered when attempting to communicate with them.
standing of cultural differences can sometimes increase one's ability
communicate.

The emotional level of all participants in a SWAT operation hinde
communication. The suspect has arrived at a crisis situation in which
is at stake. He has also placed in jeopardy his opponents and perhaps
Though ideally the officers are trained, cool-headed professionals, th
still human. They may be able to operate at a more rational level tha
suspect, but they cannot stop the adrenalin flow when their life is in
The suspect has a specific goal in mind and the only thing that stands
way is the SWAT Squad. Every emotion that the suspect is experiencing
intensified and directed at the object of his frustrations -- SWAT. E
loaded language prevails and little specific, concrete information is
Heightened emotions generally results in less specific, less accurate,
problem-solving communication.

Another communication barrier in a SWAT operation exists among th
personnel themselves. During an operation officers may be unable to m
visual and verbal contact due to logistics, radio failure, necessity f
or an attempt to keep the location of officers hidden from the suspect
officer is located on the roof of a house above the window where the s
barricaded, radio contact would give away the officer's position. So
Squad faces the problem of limited communication among themselves duri
operation.

A final communication barrier is the officers' limited knowledge of the suspect's motives or intentions. Even if the suspect has a long record, psychiatric history, or explicitly states his intentions, the officers are still dealing with many unknowns. The stated motive may mask real reasons, either intentionally or unintentionally. A suspect threatening suicide may, in fact, want to be overpowered and stopped. A request to speak with one's mother or psychiatrist may really be a stall for time. So the limited knowledge of real intentions or motives may make communication very difficult.

To summarize my comments here, let me reiterate three major ideas. First, it appears to me that the SWAT Squad could profit from training in interviewing and crisis intervention since their primary goal is to use nonviolent methods to contain violent situations. Second, this initial training session did more to isolate the communication problems of the SWAT Squad than to provide training for the officers. Third, several recommendations for future training could be made: a) more experiential activities and less emphasis on theoretical material would be useful; b) several training sessions would be more effective than just one; c) use of television film coverage of earlier SWAT operations would provide realistic examples for analysis and study.

Given that ninety percent of all barricaded suspect episodes can be brought under control without gunfire <u>if</u> verbal contact can be established, it is well worth the time and effort of the law enforcement officer and the communication scholar to examine the training of SWAT officers in interviewing and crisis intervention.

RESOURCES

A. Readings

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Kirkham, George. "A Professor's Street Lessons," FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin.

McQueeney, John. "Discretionary Decision Making," Lecture notes from Police Academy Sessions.

Pfister, Gordon. "An Investigation of the Effectiveness of Laboratory Training in Increasing Interpersonal Communication Skills With Police Officers," University of Washington, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1970.

Wambaugh, Joseph. The Onion Field. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973.

Materials made available through the Help Center on crisis intervention.

B. In-depth interviews with the sergeant in command of the SWAT Squad, a lieutenant with a M.A. in psychology, and numerous officers.

C. Examination of physical facilities and equipment and a tour of duty in a squad car with the SWAT sergeant.